

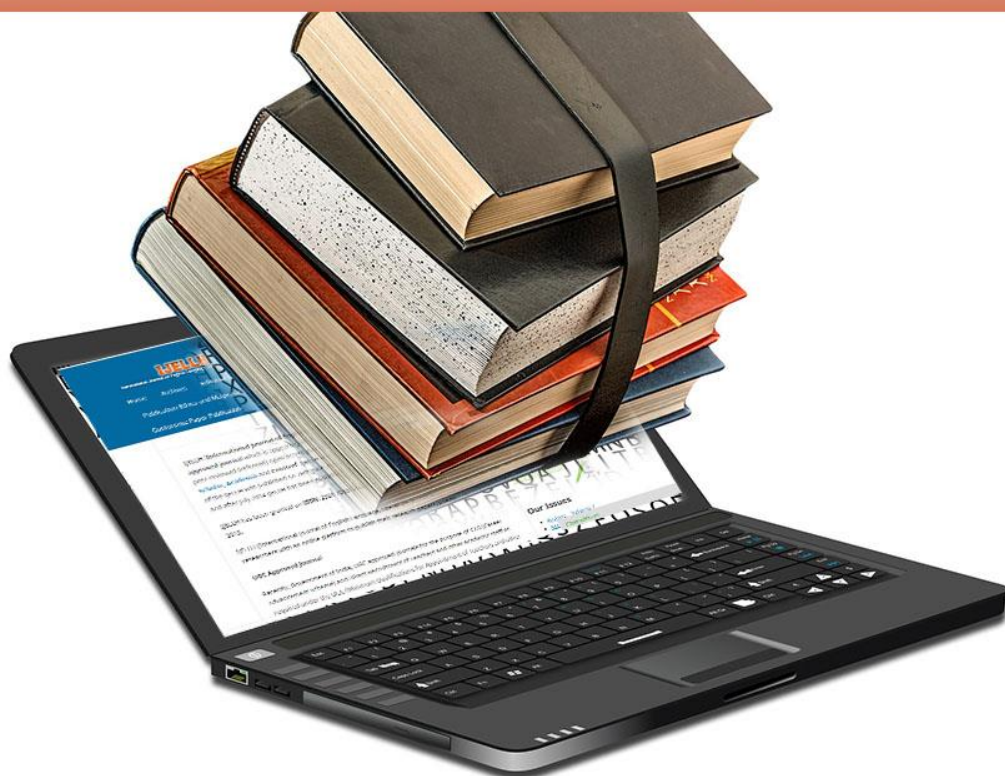
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The Sense of the Past: Historical perspective in Atiq Rahimi's Novels

Abstract

New Historicism is a theoretical approach that believes that history and text are intertwined. Greenblatt believes that there is a relation between text and context, and art and society. A text is produced by humans and as a human made object is radically informed by all the forces that condition and shapes his society and history. A social, political, religious, and economic factor of a society determines the literature it produces. A person lives in pain can explain the depth of his wound. Rahimi always embraces his identity as an Afghan. Rahimi believes Afghanistan's present horrendous situation is because of its terrible past. Rahimi's works records the transformation of the solemn land into a bloody land. The Afghan's fate changes with the arrival of Soviet. The political changes pave the way for violence in Afghanistan. This paper analyses the past political changes of Afghanistan are responsible for the present dreadful conditions of the country.

New Historicism is a theoretical approach that suggests, literature must be read, study and interpret within the historical context of its production. Studying the history reveals more about the text and studying the text reveals more about history. New Historicism helps us to understand how the authors biography, the social and political upheavals of the time are reflected in the works.

Stephan Greenblatt is an American literary historian and the founder of New Historicism. He introduced the term in his work *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance* (1982) to describe the permeability of literature and history. In his essay *Towards a Poetics of Culture* he argues that a work is colored by the writer's beliefs, his social status and other factors. New Historicism does not view the text and its context as separate entities. Rather, it discusses the text as a part of its historical context and looks at many elements outside the work instead of reading the text in isolation.

New historicist readings use vast amount of background information collected from social, cultural, political and history in analyzing the text. It also looks for the authors biographical details like his childhood and upbringing, the society, the political situation and so on.

The film maker and novelist Atiq Rahimi is a living vessel familiar with the individual and communal forms of Afghanistan. Like millions of others, he leaves Afghanistan during the Russian occupation. He create various characters in his own image or the images he encounters in his life, showing writers are not sages or prophets, but are average citizen, and they too participate in social life.

New Historicism argues that literature is informed by its historical context and each and every text is influenced by the time period. Greenblatt points out that literature functions as a political tool, as a byproduct of power and part of cultural reproduction. Greenblatt establishes that there is an obsolete and impenetrable barrier between us and the past, and that

our reading of the past is conditioned by the power relation in which we live and think. A writer produces stories of the past and exposes the world about the hidden truth in socio political scenes.

Rahimi manage to condense centuries of Afghan history in his novels. The devastation of Afghanistan during Soviet invasion and the brutality of fundamentalists are clearly and piercingly convey in his novels. His works are a literary testament about the horrors of war. He makes the readers to realize the horrible situation of the Afghan people by revealing the extremity and ambiguity of war.

New Historicism insists that a text is influenced by the historical context. It becomes a need to analyze the political history of Afghanistan, as it becomes the platform for all the works of Rahimi. The culture of Afghanistan is very ancient. It is mostly a tribal and rural village with different regions of the country having their own native language. Afghans are very proud of their land, religion and ancestry. They value their independence and these highlanders are known for their loyalty to their clan. Afghanistan faces many invasions and stand between various powers like Greeks, Persians, Arabs, Moghals, as well as British. All these physical conquest of Afghanistan has brought temporary impacts. But the invasion of Soviet has completely ruined Afghanistan and led to the beginning of never ending war in Afghanistan.

In the third Anglo-Afghan war king Amanullah seized power from the British. He decides to modernize his kingdom. He is the first Afghan ruler to take aid and military assistance from Soviet Union. Amanullah desires to change Afghanistan into a modern secular state which is opposed by conservative tribes and they considered modernism is against the Afghans traditional customary practices. He removes the veil from women, introduces education for women and force Afghans to wear western dresses. He removes conservative clergy's from position. Amanullahs Marxist reforms are hated by conservatives.

As a result a civil war breaks on 1929 and Amanullah is abducted. Zahir Shah, son of Nadir shah restore the rule from Amanullah on 1933. Afghanistan begins to develop economically with the help of foreign aid, and creates a modern military with the help of Soviet Union. Mohammed Daoud, Zahir Shah's cousin launches a coup when the king is abroad and crowns himself the president. But Daoud Khan's rule is marked by corruption and instability. Hafizullah Amin and Babrak Karmal, the former leftist parties of People Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) overcome their differences to oppose his regime. Political chaos and violent repression starts.

On April 1978, Hafizullah Amin, the strong man of the PDPA, organize a coup that topple Daoud Khans regime. Amin's mentor Noor Mohammed Taraki is installed as party leader, President and Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, with Amin as the Deputy Prime Minister. Later Amin wants more power and take over the role of Prime Minister a year later. The Soviet Union worries about Amin's power and his anti-Islamic stance advices Taraki to get rid of Amin. But the attempt to kill Amin fails. Instead Amin kills Taraki and seize power on 14 September 1979.

Amin tries to maintain relations with Pakistan and United States. It alarms Soviet Union and to implement its authority Soviet invaded Afghanistan on 24 December 1979. Amin is killed on 27 December, and Babrak Karmal, the puppet of Soviet Union is handed the role of President by the invaders. The governments Marxist reforms and the vigorous suppression of opposition, executing thousands of political prisoners and ordering massacres against unarm civilians lead to the rise of anti-government armed Islamic groups called Mujahideen. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and United States funds and supplies arms to the Mujahedeens. The Mujahideen wages guerilla wars and in small groups they operate in almost eighty percent of the country. The Soviets use their air power to deal harshly with both rebels and civilians destroying villages that has been a safe haven for Mujahedeens. They destroy

irrigation lands, ditches and laid millions of land mines. Their bloody war lasts for nine years and Afghanistan is ruined completely. In 1980 the Soviet increases their fighting and the cost of the war is high. By 1987 Soviet under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev announce its willingness to withdraw their forces. On 1989 Soviet withdraw from Afghanistan.

Mujahedeen starts the fight to save their country from communist. But the lack of unity between the groups and the blood thirsty power distracts them from their virtuous role. External forces like America, Pakistan and Saudi supports certain groups and they become prominent, and the popular one was Taliban. They receive support from the ISI and the Al-Qaeda of Pakistan. The Taliban rise to power and introduces harsh Islamic laws and brutally treats Afghans, especially women. The Taliban and their allies massacre civilians, denies food supplies from the UN to 160000 starving civilians and destroyed food sources, water supplies, transportation, communication and industrial resources. They burn vast areas of fertile land and destroy thousands of homes.

Political repression and resistance are intensely pictured in Rahimi's novels. Being a citizen of Afghanistan he tries to expose the dark truths of Afghanistan that is hidden to the world. Khaled Hosseini in his reviews on *The Patience Stone* admires the skills of Rahimi. He opines

Rahimi chooses not to take us in the streets. Instead, we experience war as most helpless civilians do. We hear the sudden burst of gun fire, the screams, and the terrifying silences. We feel the impact of mortar fire when the room shakes and the plaster flakes rain down...Rahimi succeeds in making us experience the chaos, the helplessness, the senseless brutality committed with impunity, the random and sudden outburst of violence that take unsuspecting lives....and in Rahimi's prose, the era comes to life to devastating effect
(Khaled Hosseini)

New Historicism suggests that literature must be read, study and interpret within the historical context of its production and the personal history of the author. *The Patience Stone* is the most popular work of Rahimi. It is translated into more than forty languages. In an interview at New York on 7 December 2002, Rahimi discloses the occasion that makes him to write *The Patience Stone*. The assassination of the Afghan poetess Nadia Anjuman inspires him to write the novel. Nadia is murder by her husband, who is a lecturer. Rahimi goes to Afghanistan to meet her family. But they refuse to meet him. Nadia's husband attempt suicide in prison and is admitted in the hospital in coma. Rahimi sees him from afar, lying in his death bed. At that moment Rahimi feels that if he is a woman, he can stay close to this man and talk to him and tell him all that a woman has in her heart. Being an Afghan he knows the state of women. Women have no voice in a patriarchal dictator country. So in order to give voice to the women he paralyzes the man. Rahimi says, he always has a question why women are absent in the society. He feels that a woman doesn't have an identity in Afghan culture. She is present in the society as a body having a very tragic life. When a woman takes identity she is condemned and damned. Nadia's family forces her husband to murder her, as they consider Nadia's poems are a disgrace to their family and society. Rahimi feels the only identity of women is burqa and that is like a jail to them.

Rahimi blames the political situation for the transition of women in Afghanistan. He says during 1970s his sister works as a journalist and she travels alone all over Afghanistan. But the communists enter and they want to expose the women but it is very extreme. Later emerges another culture, a culture of Arabic and Pakistani people (The Taliban). All these influx changes the identity of Afghan women. The life of women in Afghanistan is pathetic. Even though the Soviet kindles war, the women enjoyed many priorities during the Soviet rule. The communist supportive rulers from Hafizullah to Amin, they try to forge Westernization in the life of woman. Veil is not compulsory. Women are allowed to wear

short dresses. Women education is insisted and it becomes mandatory for girls to attend primary schools. Coeducation is introduced. Women are allowed to walk alone freely. Women are allowed to occupy high positions in the society. This modernism is not accepted by the conservatives, who always treat women as their possessions and raise their oppositions for women freedom.

The Taliban hates communist ideas and they introduce harsh laws targeting women. Woman becomes prey to politics and religion. Women are not allowed to walk alone without a blood relative. A woman's face should not be seen through the windows, so windows are sealed. Taliban ban singing, dancing and ban wearing bright color dresses. They completely ban women education. Girl's schools are changed to boy's schools. Rahimi anticipate Afghan tradition. So he created revolutionary woman characters in his novels. All the heroines of Rahimi are brave, confident and courageous. In *The Patient Stone* Rahimi give his heroine a second chance to live, by giving a handsome young boy as her partner. He bravely portrays her as an epitome of womanhood and as a revolutionist, she puts her all effort to bring her comatose husband alive. But when he tries to kill her at the end she kills him. In *A Thousand Rooms of Dreams and Fear*, he presents Mahnaz as a brave woman, who is not confine by traditional rules. She refuses to marry her brother in law after the death of her husband. She resists leaving her native land amidst commotion. Rahimi breaks the traditional norm by allowing a young man Farhad to stay with a widow. In *A Curse on Dostoevsky* he presents woman as breadwinners and bold decision makers.

To unlock a textual meaning, a new historicist investigates three areas of concerns, the life of the author, the social rules and dictates find within a text and the reflection of the works historical situation as evidence. Being a Kabuli all Rahimi's works are set up in Kabul. After the Saur revolution many Afghans run away from the country. Rahimi also exiles to Pakistan. He says he cannot forget the bitter experience in his life. He walks nine days and

nights amidst rugged valleys and icy mountains to reach Pakistan. In the journey he encounters death many times because if the exiles are found by the soldiers they arrest or kill them.

The Russians invade Afghanistan and along with the help of Taraki government they tortured people, only communists supporters are left alive. On the ground of mere suspicion civilians are imprisoned and sentenced to death without trial. People are unaware of their punishment. *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear* is set at a time of acute political upheaval in Afghanistan. The novel's protagonist Farhad is beaten up by Russian soldiers on his way back home. Farhad cannot understand the reason for his beatings. In order to survive he has to run leaving his family. There is no cost for life in Afghanistan, anything can happen at any time. Each stone and sand witnesses the agony of the people.

In *A Thousand Rooms of Dreams and Fear* Mahnaz's husband is thrown into jail and is executed for no reason. Mahnaz's 17-year-old brother is twice called for the army. Every time he returns with more injury. Mahnaz says "He was in the prison for three weeks. I don't know what on earth they did to him there. His mind is gone. His hair turned white overnight. Now he never says a word. Every night he wakes up, moaning and sobbing like a newborn child" (62).

Enayat and Farhad are good friends, one day in college Enayat scribbles a ditty and tosses it towards Farhad but it lands at the foot of a communist student and before the classes are over Enayat is taken away from the class. Enayat decides to run away to avoid execution. Before the Saur Revolution day in 1978, a decree is issued. Everyone in Kabul should paint their front door red, or hang a red flag in the window. Enayat's brother and his friends stain some sheets with sheep's blood and sell them to their neighbours. On the Revolution day the blood has turned black, and Enayat's brother and his friends are arrested. Enayat's brother committed suicide in prison. "If Enayat's brother hadn't killed himself, maybe he'd have

turned out like Yahya's uncle young man with no youth, with no soul. A body suspended between two arches" (94).

Pul-e Charkhi is a famous prison in the outskirts of Kabul. It is constructed by Daoud Khan. The prison becomes the center of torture and executions during the ten year Soviet war. From April 1978 to December 1979, the Communist's Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan under Nur Muhammad Taraki executes around 27,000 political prisoners at Pul-e Charkhi. Families of those who are arrested or disappeared wait outside the prison walls every day. They long to receive the news about their loved ones. The chief agent of this terror is the AGSA (Department for Safeguarding the Interests of Afghanistan) and its network of willing and forced informers. Amnesty International Human Rights estimate that in mid 1979 more than 12,000 people are hanged without trial.

Rahimi explains the trouble corner life of the Afghans. Farhad escape from the communist and falls in the hands of Muslim fundamentalists. Farhad do not understand the reason for his punishment, he is ignorant of his mistake. All he realizes is to save himself he must flee to Pakistan. He will never see his beloved mother and siblings. He is force to exile from his native land. Before entering he is blocked by fundamentalists. They blames him an atheist infidel, scolds him for not doing his ablutions and not shaving his pubic hair. "This man is an infidel!' he informs the young bearded man, his eyes burning with hatred. He must never be allowed to leave for Pakistan to spread his filth" (138). In *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear* Rahimi makes overt references to the political, social and religious foolishness. No one is allow to smoke in a mosque but these fundamentalists smokes and forces Farhad to smoke. He scorns the political scene directly by his razor sharp words. "Then I felt the Kalashnikov butt thud into my guts...vomit shot up my throat and sprayed out all over the officers' uniform...all over the photo of Hafizullah Amin dangling from the

mirror of the jeep.”(11)Atiq breaks the powerful conservative norms by allowing his hero to stay with a widow and by picturing Mahnaz showing her uncover hair.

New Historicism evaluates how the work is influenced by the time in which the author writes. It examines the social sphere in which the author moves. It also analyses the psychological background of the writer and the books and theories that may have influence him.

Rahimi in an interview on 7 Aug 2013, at the San Francisco International Film festival reveals the secrets of his heart to the interviewer Sophia Stein. Rahimi feels a writer is like the patience stone (a mystic black stone that absorbs the secrets of the people and explodes one day). He travels, he meets, he listens, he observes, he collects everything. A good day breaks, he writes, and on that day, he creates literature. Rahimi leaves Afghanistan in 1984 and he writes lately on 1996, the year the Taliban has taken power in Afghanistan. But the most important incident in his life is his communist brother is killed by Fundamentalists (1992). But the death news is not revealed to him for two years. Later when he is in France, he comes to know about his brother's death from his father. He cannot mourn for his brother's death. But he has a question why his parents do not reveal the truth. From this is born his first book *Earth and Ashes* (2000).

Earth and Ashes tells about the distressing heart of a father who is going to reveal the murder of his family to his beloved son, who is working in a mine. Rahimi colors this novel with true emotions, being a sufferer of the unpleasant experience he painfully opines the emotions of Dastaguir. Rahimi explains the political conspiracy of the age, how the communists and Fundamentalists forces young man to join the army. Dastaguir narrates the reason for the destruction of his village

A group of government trouble makers came to our village to enlist fighters for the Russians. Half the young people fled, the other half hid. On the pretext

of searching the houses, the government soldiers wrecked and looted everything. In the middle of the night men from the next village arrived and killed the government soldiers...they left with the men who had hidden to avoid serving under the red flag... (20).

The next day the Russians arrives and explodes the whole village. On one side the government schemes against the civilians, on the other the Jihadists plot against the people. Both groups are utilizing people for their own privileges. Dastaguir knows his son Murad is not a coward, if he hears the murder of his family, certainly he will take revenge. On reaching he is shocked to know that Murad is wrongly informed that mujahedeen's has killed his family. The communists are brainwashing him to join the revolution against mujahedeen's.

In his interview Rahimi recalls his life in Afghanistan, in 1980 when he is a student he works as a journalist. It is the beginning of war and he is assigned to make a report on the workers in carbon mine. One day he forgets his expensive camera in a local tea house. One week later when he comes back to the tea house the man calls him and hands his camera. Rahimi remarks the man is not a rich, he can sell and make a fortune but he wants to return it to Rahimi. In *Earth and Ashes* Rahimi gives life to the tea house man as Mirza Qadir, a shopkeeper, a compassionate man who tries to wipe the tears of the sorrowful.

Rahimi returns to Afghanistan on 2002, he trace huge differences in Afghan. The walls of each house are very high. The windows are all closed with brick and everybody watch him with hesitation. He also faces a different experience. His bags and camera are looted in a tea shop while he is having his tea. War changes people. Rahimi knows the Afghans are endowed with geniality and warmth. But the world personifies Afghans as terrorists. Rahimi states the war in Afghanistan is not for the people. All the Afghans are not Taliban and all the Taliban are not Afghans. It is a war against massive international Terrorism, based on the frontier of Pakistan and the Saudi Arabia. The Pakistan's and Saudi

Arabian's rebels enter Afghanistan and seize power and pave the way for the Afghan resistance when they impose their law.

In New Historicism texts are social documents that reflect and respond to their historical situation. In *A Curse on Dostoevsky* the historical period is the post-communist period and prior to Taliban taking power. It is a period that the mujahedeen's start to occupy the nation. Rahimi expresses the painful situation of his native land.

From then on storytellers, poets and holy men flocked to this valley from all over the world...bring it to life in their voices ,and immortalize in their memories...And this was threatening to the history distorters, the tale forgers ,the science imposters, the shady politicians...One day they all descended upon the village. Invaded it, destroyed it. They destroyed everything! They deafened the children and cut out the adults tongues...but what they didn't realize was there were not only human beings, the houses, the rocks, the water, the wind, the air, the birds, the snakes....everything in this valley could remember the people, its history, its wisdom, and also the barbarism of the tyrants! .(162)

In an interview to J.K. Fowler Rahimi sadly expresses his native land is caught in the dark terror of war and fundamentalism and he loses his key of identity, liberty and independence. So he goes somewhere in search of light, liberty and independence. But he fails to find it as he has left it in his country. So he creates it in his imagination. For Rahimi writing about Afghanistan is like creating his key. So when he writes he feels as an Afghan even if he is in France.

Rahimi says that Afghanistan is caught between political conspiracies. The Taliban leave Afghanistan and they are welcomed by Pakistan. They actively organize an army, arms and money and are conspiring to come back to Afghanistan with the support of Pakistan. The

Americans chase Taliban and took control of Afghanistan. In the name of democracy they place the puppet government of Hamid Karzai and use Afghan for their benefits. Rahimi remarks it is not only the war of Fundamentalists it is a war of business, the commercial war. Afghanistan is in the middle of China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and America. All the countries are utilizing Afghans resources for its benefits. Pakistan, United States and China use Afghanistan to change money and to negotiate commercial items. Afghanistan is caught in the middle of all this.

Malalai Joya in her autobiography *Raising my Voice* blames that Afghanistan has long been used as a deadly playground in the great game between super powers, from the British to the Soviet Empire and now the Americans and their allies. They try to rule Afghanistan by dividing it. They have given money to thugs and fundamentalists and war lords to driven the people into terrible misery. Afghanistan is misused and misrepresented to the world. She rightly believes, democratic values cannot be imposed by foreign troops. No nation can donate liberation to another nation. The values must be fought and win by the people themselves. Afghanistan can grow and flourish when the democratic values are planted by the people in their own soil and watered by their own blood.

Being an Afghan Rahimi found it painful to watch the destruction of his native land. He says Afghans are not terrorists, they are victims of terrorism. He wants to reveal the truth about his own people, their honesty, and their warmth and how the thirty years of war has collapsed the nation. He openly scorns the blood thirsty politicians. He believes that the war in Afghanistan is not for the Afghan people, the war is between humanity and some fundamentalist movement. He fills his pen with the ink of love and honor for his country and pens to wipe out the misunderstanding about his country.

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